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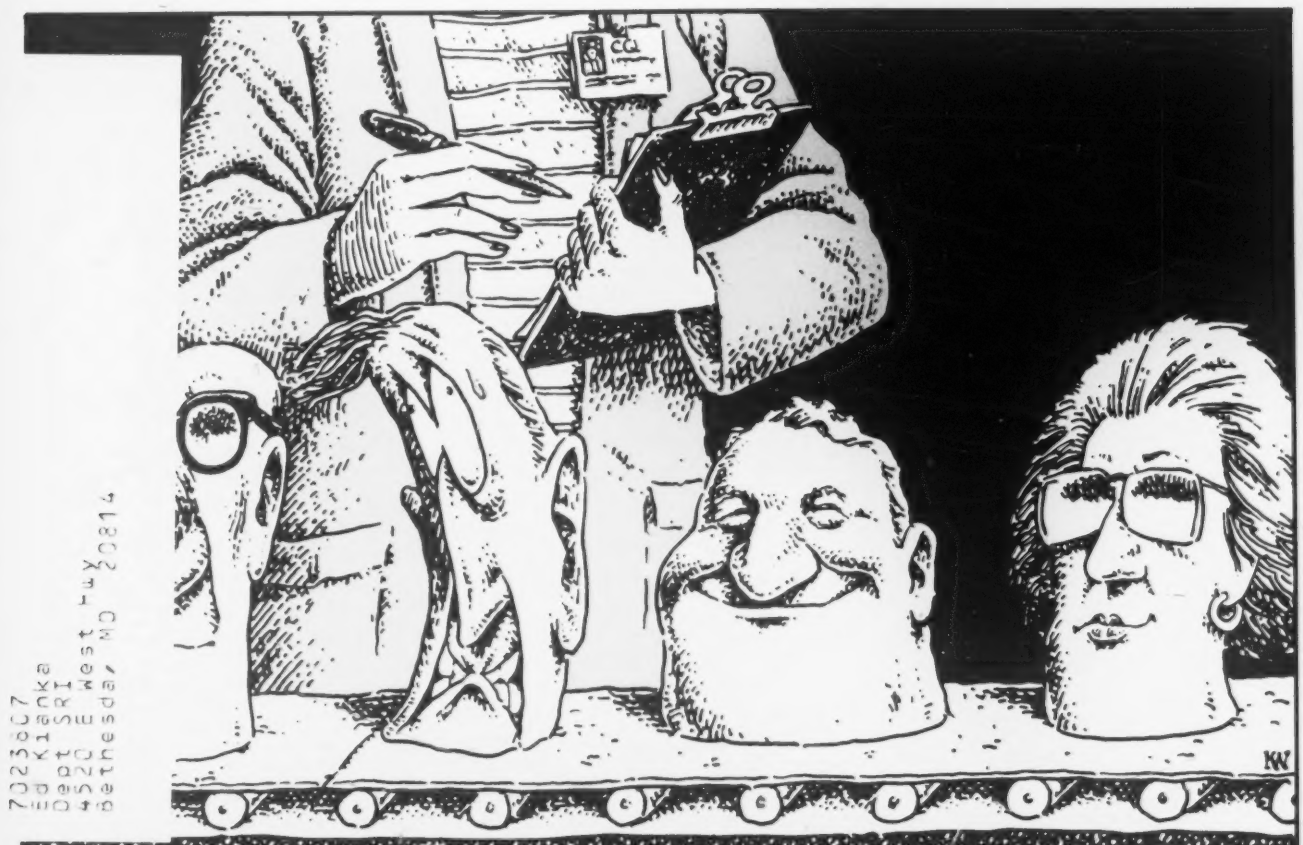

Quality control ('kwäl·ət·ē kən·'trōl) *n*: an aggregate of activities designed to ensure high quality in products or services.

QUALITY CONTROL

Translating ideal to real

PUBLIC RELATIONS JOURNAL

March 1989 Vol. 45 No. 3

FEATURES

18 Public Relations Quality Control: Translating Ideal to Real

An increasing number of firms and corporate public relations departments (and not *just* the mega-operations) are using quality control techniques in an effort to raise the quality level and consistency of everything from press releases to counseling procedures. Practitioners who are grappling with translating QC theory into procedures that yield results in the white-collar public relations workplace share the ins and outs of their own systems—and their thoughts on the opportunities and limitations posed by QC. *By Joan Reisman*

26 Why Stay Independent?

In a public relations marketplace where it sometimes seems that firms that are "owned" have daunting competitive advantages, why do some public relations entrepreneurs continue to pass up lucrative acquisition offers? An independent counselor gets some frank answers from entrepreneurs as to why they've so far resisted the "urge to merge"—and what might make them change their minds. *By Alfred Geduldig*

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What's wrong with this picture?
Peter Harrison

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Cover Illustration: *Ken Westphal*

Issues of control

WHEN you get right down to it, there's nothing new about the basic premise of quality control in professional circles. No business can become successful, or stay that way for long, if its management isn't employing effective quality control—even if the methods used aren't labelled as such. What's new, however, are the increasingly formal efforts in public relations and other white-collar, professional fields to analyze and attempt to adapt to their own needs the QC principles and techniques that have been developed and honed for years within the manufacturing sector.

In exploring the status of public relations quality control, writer/consultant Joan Reisman—a former account supervisor for Burson-Marstellar and product manager for Pfizer Laboratories—found that the approaches being used are as creative and diverse as the field itself *(page 18)*. There are, of course, many other innovative QC techniques and systems out there, and we'd welcome your letters, if you'd like to share your own solutions or opinions on the subject.

"What price independence?" was the question recently posed by independent counselor Alfred Geduldig to several independent public relations firm owners *(page 26)*. His intro—a tongue-in-cheek, futuristic scenario—is his way of broaching the serious and very timely topic of the many factors that successful independents must weigh when considering a growing number of acquisition offers.

Among the provocative questions raised by the piece is how to differentiate an independent from an "owned" firm in the first place. While it's common in this field to equate "owned" with "owned by an ad agency," Geduldig's definition centers not on the nature of the parent company's business, but on whether a firm is *"owned and managed by the people who work in (it)."* On this basis, he questions whether Shandwick, usually listed as the largest independent, is really an independent at all. Although it is strictly a public relations operation, the author maintains that its parent company is in essence a "holding company" or "conglomerate owner," and that neither it nor the individual units within its group meet his definition of an independent.

Shandwick, as would be expected, has its own views on the matter. Charles Jones, president of Shandwick North America, maintains that the giant is indeed an independent because its "whole thrust is PR," in contrast to operations in which "PR is subservient to some other marketing discipline." Jones points out that the largest single owner of Shandwick, Chairman/CEO Peter Gummer, has spent his career in journalism and public relations, and, since founding Shandwick in 1974, has continued to build it from the standpoint of a public relations executive. Gummer, Jones maintains, hires top executives who act as counselors to firms within the group rather than make decisions for them.

"Shandwick's publicly-stated goal is to be the best PR firm with the largest geographic span and span of disciplines," he stresses, asserting that "far from threatening their independence," joining Shandwick is a choice made by firms who recognize that public relations is becoming national and international in its scope, and that joining together will bring them business that they could not get on their own. "Even though we as an organization have mainly been concentrating on building our distribution in the last few years, there have been almost 100 client-initiated referrals that have benefitted agencies within our network. Now, we're in a new stage. We're investing all of our profits, after payment of dividends, into developing new business. There's nothing wrong with having financial goals, as long as resources are invested back into the business."

What's your opinion? Can a group like Shandwick truly be considered an independent? Does it matter? Watch *PRJ*'s "Feedback" column for your responses.

And speaking of responses . . .

PRJ's Annual Salary Survey, now in its fourth year, has become a valuable point of reference for our readers. We urge you to help make this year's survey just as successful and useful, by filling out the questionnaire facing this column. Look for results and analysis in our June issue.

—Karlene Lukovitz, Editor

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The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is an individual membership professional society of 14,265 public relations practitioners. Its major services to members include programs of Professional Development and Accreditation, an Information Center, publications, tracking of issues of national concern, and promotion of ethical practice through adherence to PRSA's "Code of Professional Standards." PRSA's mission is "To serve the public need for understanding and cooperation among its diverse interests by fostering high professional and ethical standards for all those practicing public relations."

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Writing remains essential practitioner skill, survey affirms

Various types require nearly 40 percent, on average, of time

Even today, as public relations moves beyond publicity into such areas as issues management, counseling, and marketing support, some form of writing is integral to nearly every aspect of public relations practice, according to a new study conducted by Frank R. Stansberry, APR, manager of guest affairs for Coca-Cola USA.

The study is among the first to attempt to quantify writing functions in the field. It also outlines how much time is spent on general public relations activities.

Stansberry sent questionnaires to a random sample of 500 practitioners listed in PRSA's 1988–'89 membership directory. The 198 respondents have an average of 12.2 years' experience in corporations, firms, non-profit organizations, or government, and nearly all (93 percent) are college graduates.

On average, respondents spend 36.5 percent of their work week on writing specifically for public relations purposes, exclusive of writing for other tasks, such as business administration. Nearly all respondents said that they do some writing, regardless of their specialty or type of employer. The *amount* of time spent writing does not vary significantly according to level of professional experience, once practitioners have passed the two-year point in their careers.

Releases top the list

Writing news releases occupies 7.1 percent of the total time of the average respondent, or 19.5 percent of his or her writing time. Writing for internal publications accounts for 5.9 percent of total time, or 16.1 percent of writing time. Writing done in connection with management counseling requires 4.3 percent of total time, or 11.1 percent of writing time.

Writing speeches, community relations plans and programs, and research reports each accounts for more than three percent of the average respondent's work time, while writing advertisement copy,

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new business proposals, and reports resulting from issues monitoring each required between 2.5 percent and 3.0 percent of respondents' time. Investor relations/financial public relations writing requires 1.1 percent of the total work time, or 3.0 percent of writing time.

Experience determines content

Respondents with less than 10 years' experience primarily write advertisements and news releases and handle internal publications, while those in the middle years in terms of experience (11 to 20 years) are in charge of issue monitoring. Senior personnel (more than 20 years' experience) are more likely to write speeches and pieces related to counseling management and communication with the financial community.

Less experienced respondents (0–5 years of experience) make up 21.2 percent of the sample, but account for 33.3 percent of advertising copy; 29.4 percent of community relations plans and reports; and 26.8 percent of internal publication writing. Those working in their sixth through tenth years comprise 26.8 percent of the sample but do 36.4 percent of the internal publication writing and more than 28 percent of the writing of news releases and new business proposals.

Time devoted to writing tasks

Writing task	% total time	% writing time
1. Releases	7.1	19.5
2. Internal publications	5.9	16.1
3. Counseling reports	4.3	11.1
4. Speeches	3.5	9.5
5. Community relations plans	3.2	8.8
6. Research reports	3.1	8.5
7. Advertising copy	2.9	7.9
8. New business proposals	2.8	7.7
9. Issues monitoring reports	2.7	7.3
10. Financial reports	1.1	3.0

Press releases remain integral to many practitioners' jobs, but so are a variety of more complex written communications.

Time devoted to various responsibilities

Function	% time	% active*
Product publicity	11.6	85
Media relations	11.0	87
Business administration	10.4	75
Internal communications	9.0	72
Management counseling	8.7	68
Community relations	8.0	68
Research	5.4	67
Advertising	5.0	53
Issues monitoring	4.8	54
Speeches	4.7	67
New business development	4.7	45
Government relations	4.1	43
Entertaining	3.9	57
Development/fund raising	2.2	23
Investor/financial relations	2.1	23
Formal education	1.6	23
Other responsibilities	3.0	NA

* percent of sample indicating some time on function

An overview of time spent on various public relations activities, most of which involve at least some writing component.

Those in the 11-to-20-year span make up another 26.8 percent of the sample, but write 32.5 percent of reports concerning issues monitoring. Senior practitioners (24.7 percent) write 57 percent of financial reports, 40 percent of management counseling documents and speeches, and 28 percent of research reports.

Defining a varied role

Stansberry also asked respondents to indicate how much time they spend on various types of public relations responsibilities, without regard to the writing component in each responsibility.

On average, respondents indicated that product publicity functions and media relations take up 11.6 percent and 11 percent of their average work week, respectively. Business administration—managing a department or firm—takes up another 10 percent; internal communications and management counseling, nine percent, and community relations work, eight percent.

"Although public relations is still firmly tied to its product publicity roots, professionals are beginning to move past simply doing communications tasks and into management of the public relations function," comments Stansberry, noting that business administration and management counseling are both within the top five responsibilities.

Practitioners involved in specific writing tasks

Writing task	% involved
1. Releases	70.7
2. Publications	58.6
3. Speeches	56.6
4. Counseling reports	51.5
5. Research reports	51.0
6. Community relations plans	48.5
7. Advertising copy	42.0
8. Issues reports	38.9
9. New business proposals	32.8
10. Financial reports	14.6

More than half of those surveyed are involved in writing counseling reports.

Twenty-nine percent of respondents work for corporations, 30 percent for public relations firms, 20 percent for nonprofits, and 11 percent for the government. Nearly half (49 percent) characterize themselves as generalists, 33 percent as policy makers, 12 percent as writers/producers, and six percent as media relations specialists. □